NEW BOOKS.

Mr. James's American Impressions.

More things than eels and sea sand are elusive; and if a fugitive from justice, hotly pursued by the police, should resolve himself into one of Mr. Henry James's "impressions" it is not likely that he would be caught. The hopeful reader, if he is also a tenacious and indomitable reader, will probably find considerable reward for his hope and compensation for his pains in the course of his labors with Mr. James's book, "The American Scene" (Harper & Brothers). Of his function or mission as an observer and as a collector and purveyor of impressions Mr. James speaks at once seriously and with humor. He will concern himself with those aspects of the scene to which by reason of their subtle and evasive nature the business of having impressions may with propriety particularly direct itself. Grosser matters he will leave alone. In his own felicitous words: "There are features of the human scene, there are properties of the social air, that the newspapers, reports, surveys and the blue books would seem to confess themselves powerless to 'handle,' and that yet represented to me a greater array of items, a heavier expression of character, than my own pair of scales would ever weigh, keep them as clear for it as I might. I became aware soon enough, on the spot, that these elements of the human subject, the results of these attempted appreciations of life itself, would prove much too numerous even for a capacity all given to them for some ten months; but at least therefore, artistically concerned as I had been all my days with the human subject, with the appreciation of life itself, and with the consequent question of literary representation, I should not find such matters scant or simple."

He found indeed many, and it would be strange if he had permitted them to be simple. It may be learned at page 4 that the scales went to Gramercy Park. They performed there a labor (the word seems curiously gross) that was characteristic. What did the scales do with life, with the human scene in Gramercy Park? They were taken to a club, we dare say for luncheon. Here is a single sentence of resulting impression. Mr. James writes: "The good easy square, known in childhood, and as if the light were yellower there from that small accident, bristled with reminders as vague as they were sweet; within especially the place was a cool breakwater, for time as well as for space; out of the slightly dim depths of which, at the turn of the staircases and from the walls of communicating rooms, portraits and relics and records, faintly, quaintly æsthetic, in intention at least, and discreetly—yet bravely, too, and all so archaically and pathetically—Bohemian, laid traps, of a pleasantly primitive order, for memory, for sentiment, for relenting irony; gross little devices, on the part of the circumscribed past, which appealed with scarce more emphasis than so many tail-pieces of closed chapters."

Closed and remembered with the smile of a man for a child. There are other memories, very notable ones, attaching to Gramercy Park, but there is a vast world outside, and the scales, while doing much, must leave much undone. The luncheon happily was long enough for a single sentence more—a sentence so shyly devious and comprehending, so considerable as a whole and in the feature of its ramifications, as to be in its own build complimentary. Space must be considered with us, but we will give it. The second sentence runs: "The whole impression had fairly a rococo tone; and it was in this perceptibly golden air, the air of old empty New York afternoons of the waning summer time, wherf the long, the perpendicular rattle, as of buckets, forever thirsty, in the bottomless well of fortune, almost dies out in the merciful cross streets, that the ample rearward loggia of the Club seemed serenely to hang; the glazed, disglazed, gallery, dedicated to the array of small spread tables for which blank 'backs,' right and left and opposite, made a privacy; backs blank with the bold crimson of the New York house painter, and playing upon the chord of remembrance, all so absurdly, with the scarcely less simplified green of their great cascades of Virginia creeper, as yet unturned: an admonition, this, for piety, as well as a reminder—since one had somehow failed to treasure it up—that the rather pettifogging plan of the city, the fruit, on the spot, of an artless age, happened to leave even so much margin as that for consoling chances."

There is indeed a third sentence, a trifle comparatively, but having bearing, and in fact important, which in our sympathetic ambition we had attached to the main pile. We will give it. It refers in its opening to the verbal finial of the previous structure, and runs: "There were plenty of these—which I perhaps seem unduly to patronize in speaking of them as only 'consoling'—for many hours to come, and while the easy wave that I have mentioned continued to float me: so abysmal are the resources of the foredoomed student of manners, or so helpless, at least, his case when once adrift in that tide." It should be added here, by way of partial explanation, that the "easy wave" of which Mr. James speaks was imaginatively established by him a page or two back. He says that he floated on it all that day and the next. It carried him to the Club in Gramercy Park and afterward bore him away to New Jersey.

Wherever he went, from Boston to Florida, Mr. James busied himself with his scales and gathered and released impressions just as we have here seen him do. Certain of his impressions are fairly salient and capable of being grasped and remembered. The attentive reader will understand that he was impressed in America by the overwhelming manifestation of good shoes, bad hats and golden dentistry. The tiaras and court trains worn by ladies in exalted society seemed to him to proclaim with mournful emphasis an unhappy want. Tiaras and court trains imply a court. Persons wearing them need to bow and need somebody to bow to. That is the meaning and the necessity of these things. A lady with a tiara who can't bow is deprived. As a substitute for a court, what has New York to offer? Plaintive voices seem to fill the air with a murmured and tentative word. We think that Mr. James has heard it; at any rate he considers the Opera. He acknowledges its value as a means of measurable salvage. He alludes to it as "the great vessel of social salvation" for New Yorkers. His attitude toward it is thoroughly respectful. He writes it with a large opening letter. But he is far from having a word of real encouragement for those who now sorrow under their tiaras. Upon this whole point he says:

"The Opera, indeed, as New York enjoys it, one promptly perceives, is worthy, musically and picturesquely, of its immense function; the effect of it is splendid, but one has none the less the oddest sense of hearing it, as an institution, groan and creak, positively almost split and crack, with the extra weight thrown upon it—the weight that in worlds otherwise arranged is artfully scattered, distributed over all the ground. In default of a court function our ladies of the tiaras and court trains might have gone on to the opera function [he refers to a company of ladies in a house where he was a visitor who did not know what to do with their tiaras after dinner], these occasions offering the only approach to the implication of the tiara known, so to speak, to the American law. Yet even here there would have been no one for them, in congruity and consistency, to curtsey to—their only possible course becoming thus, it would seem, to make obeisance, clingingly, to each other. * * * In worlds otherwise arranged, besides there being always plenty of subjects for genuflection, the occasion itself, with its character fully turned on, produces the tiara. In New York this symbol has, by an arduous extension of its virtue, to produce the occasion."

Mr. James found the New York clubs hospitable rather than exclusive. He would have omitted the girl with the olive branch from the Saint-Gaudens statue of Gen. Sherman. Having a Destroyer in hand, he would have him thorough, unmitigated, "not docked of one of his bristles." There is interesting and fairly clear impression of West Point, the tomb of Gen. Grant and the Tiffany store. As we have said, there is compensation for the faithful. Nobody denies that Mr. Henry James can be of distinguished interest when he pleases.

Some Newly Directed Enthusiasms.

Whether or not rhapsodies expended upon the art that may be involved in the modelling of images by young ladies are likely to be attractive to the point of being valuable in a novel is a question that must be approached with caution. In the lack of any testimony that we can just now recall, we ourselves should feel a great reluctance to adjudicate it. Readers often are creatures of temperament rather than judgment, and we dare say that many of them select and like their fiction for reasons that cannot be deemed important. Enthusiasm concerning music, both in and out of novels, is very general; and we recall a tale that achieved a large circulation notwithstanding and perhaps for the reason that somebody in it played the piano with such power that everybody present in a London drawing room was enabled distinctly and exactly to see and hear the River Neva rolling on its course—not as it rolled at that moment, though so much would have been remarkable, but as it had rolled and as it had looked and sounded on some elapsed Russian midnight.

Rhapsodical descriptions of music, then, are accepted by the public; they are frequent in novels and do not seem to hurt the circulation of these; but we cannot say what the case would be with statuary. In Mary Mears's quite remarkable story of "The Breath of the Runners" (Frederick A. Stokes Company) there are two American girls who pursue with intense enthusiasm the practice of the plastic art. Their ardors blaze out in a hundred fires in the course of the strong, the often admirable description. We have marked one or two places. Enid Rahfield, while she was still a child, and at her first essay, produced a statue of overflowing significance. It was modelled upon a drunken beggar woman who had her post at Lexington avenue and Twenty-third street. The story says of it: "There it was. It fairly breathed the spirit of the old wretch. In the eyes covetousness glowed like a fire. The wrinkles of the face seemed like the closed talons of a claw, the sunken mouth and sharp, protruding chin seemed to shut in a secret over which the whole creature gloated. The breasts flat and dependent, told of the press of money bags, the shape of which they suggested. If this female Caliban had ever had a child, you felt that she would have sold it for whatever it would bring in money, in drink, in pleasures. Every wrinkle of her dress bespoke a devilish device. She was all openness and yet all concealment. She was at once the means and the end of Vice. She was Vice incarnate."

Mr. Henry Morley spoke in a poem of "the service of the clay." This clay in the story did excellent service for the genius of Enid. Beulah Marcel was the discoverer, teacher and friend of Enid. John Howard, the learned scholar, the middle aged Egyptologist, loved Beulah. The story speaks at page 139 of how he considered her. It says: "While nothing was lacking in the intimate appeal Beulah made to him, she roused all that was dreamy and ideal in his nature, and giving rein to his imagination he attempted to trace her disguised in art and poetry, in places and scenes luminous in his memory. He recalled in the monastery of the Certosa the almost obliterated relief of a sleeping monk, clipt from head to heel in a straight habit, the folds of which were instinct with that coquetry that lurks, unconscious of itself, behind all human dignity. His love, her youth clothed upon with deep and serious quiet, charmed him with the remembered charm of this burial slab. Again he sought to find her in a line of verse. She looked at him through words of peaceful meaning; in the rhythm he caught her movements, head and waist and sandaled feet. She appeared before him, limned in melody, a creature girlish and incomplete. And the more extravagant the fancy the deeper was his pleasure in it."

Surely the sympathy of the reader will bestow itself there, and the approval as well, though it is probably not common and not easy to find in a burial slab the glamourous suggestion of one's lady love. Beulah and her friend Richard Yates, who was also an artist, attracted attention when they walked together in Paris. On one occasion they radiated or extailed an unusual and even tangible effect. "Always, when together," we read, "they made so fine an appearance as to excite attention. But now they were so vivified that people looked after them, less because of their coneliness than because they could catch the aroma of the thoughts of each, as we catch the odor of flowers carried past us." It is fairly painful to regard Enid Rahfield at her work. In the words of the story: "You could almost hear her heart laboring in the sweet shallow cup of her girl's breast so strenuously as to stir the long folds of her modelling blouse—you could feel the leaping of the nerves in the delicate wrists and temples, and the great surging tide of thought in the look she poured on her work. She seemed, small as she was, like a fire, a hurricane, a maelstrom of energy, the one outlet of which was through a hand, small as a child's, veined heavily with blue. All the Graces had kissed these hands. They had the cunning and the august power of their craft. They were creators."

We hardly need to go further in order to illustrate the enthusiasms of which we have spoken. When John Howard, the quiet Egyptologist, had married Beulah, and when he was jealous, he also was torn by his emotions. "John Howard could have crushed, have killed, his mate." We will indicate merely to what end Enid was led by her jealous and stormy passions. Beulah, searching for the missing Enid, visited the morgue. Enid was not there, though she had been. In the words of the story: "A pair of shoes! Defaced by the water, heavy with mud, they not only proclaimed their wearer indubitably, but, carrying even now in their stiffened creases the ruling motive of that life, they appeared to her as the symbol of all human energy. In them was the visible sign of that energy that convulsed the city [the city of Paris] brought to its climax. The start was there and the goal, and the long, hard struggle that lay between. Ah, the dishonor, the slime on them; the sun, and the ecstasy! The custodian called a cab for her and she thanked him quietly and rolled away." The description is perilously strong at times, but there is great cleverness in the story.

Bettina and Her Adventure.

Of the emotions induced in us by the books that we take up, we prize highly those that are agreeable and cheerful, and Eleanor Hoyt Brainerd's story of "Bettina" (Doubleday, Page & Co.) has furnished us, as we knew it would, with a distinctly pleasurable hour. The Bettina of this tale is another figure in the pleasant and now considerable company that Mrs. Brainerd has summoned for us with her happily dexterous and comprehending pen. To say that Bettina is alive here, that her inventor has established her in the printed word with an art that enables us really to see and hear her, and to be glad of her accordingly, is to speak quite within the fact, and to indicate but meagrely the satisfaction that we have found in the story.

We have heard so often that it is odious to reveal an author's plot that we believe it, and shall not now permit ourselves to be offensive in this particular, but there can be no harm in saying so little as that Bettina, going across the ferry, met a stranger and thought she knew him, and that there were consequences. Of the railroad accident and of the injury that befell the fortunate stranger we forbear to speak, nor shall we let it be known that during his period of convalescence he and Bettina made the acquaintance of each other. Whether or not he was a deserving and handsome and entertaining stranger we leave to the reader to find out, but we ourselves liked him, and we were pleased when he reached the felicity of being a stranger to Bettina no longer.

An English Story With a Moral.

Questions of religion are considered in Mr. W. H. Fitchett's story of "Ithuriel's Spear" (Eaton & Mains). Claude Meares and Cecil Sparks agreed with the iconoclastic Mr. Gifford, who had lectured with much rhetorical effect before the Free-thought Association, quoting at the last in a deep and thrilling voice from "The City of Dreadful Night." Man was an unregarded speck upon the unguided atom that we call the earth. So Mr. Gifford, who was a master of rotund expression and positive thought, had declared in his lecture, and Claude and Cecil were satisfied of the truth of the announcement. Claude was "a tall and slight built figure, with a head that seemed like a heavy flower on a too slender stalk. He had a curiously sensitive mouth and pensive yet questioning eyes." It is easy to understand that he suffered as a consequence of hearing Mr. Gifford. He was an artist, with religious needs, and Mr. Gifford, with a sweep of thought and sound, had expunged the immediate glory of the universe. Of what significance now were the rivers, the sunset, and the flowers? Meaning they had none. The direpting Mr. Gifford had deprived them, plucked them bold. "Why should I paint a dead face?" cried Claude. It is probable that he saw the pleasant art of landscape painting in hopeless occultation.

Cecil Sparks did not suffer. He was of another build. He had a "keen face, hair as dark as a raven's wing, restless eyes and a smile which, as it revealed the level white teeth, swept over his dark features with the effect of a sudden and dazzling flash of light." He assumed the sceptical attitude jauntily. "I've only the plain sense of the commercial mind," he declared in the course of the argumentation. Perhaps that explains his immunity from mere spiritual seizure and pain.

A third person in the group was different from both of these. Mr. Gifford had had no moulding effect upon Kit Somers. "The world is built on Christianity," said Kit. "It is unintelligible without it. It would come to a stop if it vanished." Kit also said: "Mr. Gifford's science is wrong. I know enough to know that. My university work taught me it. All science has as its root an act of faith. The physical is only a veil behind which the spiritual hides or an instrument for the spiritual to use. You leave out half the universe—and its noblest half—if you reject, as he does, the spiritual."

Passing over the effect of Mr. Gifford's lecture in Middleford religious circles, and the opinions regarding it that were entertained and expressed by Mr. Sawders, the Congregational minister, and Mr. Twitters, the secretary of the Young Men's Christian Association; ignoring, for the sake of a necessary brevity only, the highly human and credible things said concerning Mr. Hobbs, the retired brewer, Mr. Creakles, the militant freethinker, and the theological round table at which Mr. Stumps sat, among others; not pausing, though our willingness is great, to disengage and array the numerous matters of especial interest in the chapters dealing with drunken logic, slippery places, a creed at work, an experiment in youth, a modern miracle, the secret of certainty, the war in South Africa and theology in flowers—we may remark how, on the occasion of the very vividly described storm in the nineteenth chapter, when the excursion boat to Slate Island was wrecked and when Ithuriel's spear tore the heavens and the sea and threatened all hands, Kit, the believer, and Cecil, the freethinker, severally bore themselves. As the author finely observes: "Death is, in one sense, the final touchstone of character. Life, it is true, searches character subtly; but death is a test of rougher, more sudden and peremptory sort." Kit, standing fearlessly, calmly on the deck of the foundering vessel, was called upon to leap down to the possible safety of a rescuing boat. He drew back in favor of an old man. As the old man was about to descend Cecil rushed upon the scene. There was room for only one more in the attending boat. Why should that one be the old man and not Cecil? The Free-thinker ratiocinated. In the words of the story: "Life was sweet, and death he believed meant annihilation. All the forces bred of faith or born of duty were gone. Why should he throw away his life—the only life he had—merely to give that unknown old man a doubtful chance of surviving? Life for Cecil was much more than it could be for him. He had had his day."

There was a little more that Cecil thought. Did he think, in such an emergency, beyond what is verisimilar. The story reassures us upon this point: It says: "Thought is swift in such a crisis. When we stand with death at the touch we think in leaps and bounds. All the reasoning we are trying to describe ran in a flash of fire through Cecil's brain. The cold night, the cruel wind, the clamor of the waves, the atmosphere of panic—all seemed to quench every passion save that of pure selfishness; and in Cecil's mind that mood became, in an instant, supreme. The baser passions triumphed.

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